

Chevron refinery fire prompts Contra Costa to revamp troubled emergency notification system



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MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa may dump the private company that provides the county's emergency telephone notification system, citing persistent shortfalls, including slow service during the recent conflagration at the Chevron refinery in Richmond.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday morning also assigned two of its members -- John Gioia of Richmond and Federal Glover, of Pittsburg -- to launch a full review of the county's groundbreaking industrial safety ordinance.

The moves came during an update on the impacts of the giant column of flame and smoke that poured out of the refinery early on the evening of Aug. 6, apparently the result of a leaking pipe.

No one was killed but county officials say 14,000 people have been seen in local emergency rooms as a result.

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The vast majority of the patients had minor symptoms but three were admitted to a hospital, county health services director Dr. William Walker told the board. Two had asthma and the third had a chronic condition, the doctor said.

Chevron's Richmond refinery manager, Nigel Hearne, also addressed the supervisors. He reiterated his company's apologies both for the fire and the resulting spike in prices at the pump.

Prices fluctuate when "the dynamic changes around supply," Hearne said. "It's unfortunate. It's the last thing we wanted."

While federal and state investigators continue to examine the fire's cause, the county is once again coming under blistering criticism for its much-maligned telephone emergency notification system.

"The vendor has a history of not performing to the county's expectations ... and it may never perform to our expectations in these large-scale types of incidents," Contra Costa Community Warning System manager Katherine Hern told supervisors.

The Minnesota-based Emergency Communications Network, which operates CityWatch, promises to notify 20,000 people within a half-hour after an emergency notification is triggered but it took as long as two hours after the Chevron blaze, Hern said.

The vendor has fixed a software "feedback loop" that bogged down the system on Aug. 6 but the bigger factor was a delay in about a quarter of the calls when the phone was unanswered by either a person or an answering machine.

The vendor could not be reached for comment as of late Tuesday.

The emergency phone tree system was put into place more than 10 years ago and technology has changed dramatically, Gioia observed.

But that doesn't mean the county should shift its focus onto social media such as Facebook or Twitter, he added. The county's 42 sirens and a telephone notification system reach far higher numbers of people and both options must be reliable, he said.

"Political campaigns manage to send out thousands of robocalls," Gioia said. "Let's make sure we have the same effectiveness when it comes to informing people of an incident."

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The ad hoc committee will also reopen the county's industrial safety ordinance, an unprecedented effort to involve local communities in refinery operations that came out of a deadly refinery accident in the 1990s.

Refinery managers vehemently opposed it at the time, but most industrial operators and regulators today credit its passage for dramatically improved safety in Contra Costa's facilities.

The Chevron fire reminds the county that it must remain vigilant, Glover said. "One of the things that has happened is that we have continued to get glowing reports in terms of the industrial safety ordinance," Glover said. "But it's time for a review."

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